



Baby Face Nelson

(Lester Joseph Gillis)

(Dec 6, 1908 - Nov 27, 1934)

At the age of six Lester Joseph Gillis (Baby Face Nelson) was enrolled in the Lafayette public school at Augusta and Fairfield Avenue. His first three years passed smoothly, even encouragingly, as there were not reported behavioral problems and he received good grades. When he was nine, approaching his first communion, his parents transferred him to St. Mark's parochial school. Almost immediately Lester had problems adjusting to the more rigid standards and conformity of the Catholic institution, and he also mourned the loss of companionship with some of his neighborhood friends. His parents soon began receiving reports that their son was not attending classes.

Tragedy befell the family about the same time Lester's absences began. Less than a week after her twenty-fifth birthday, Jenny Gillis (Lester's sister) became gravely ill, a victim of the great influenza epidemic that swept across America at the end of World War I claiming half a million lives. After eight bedridden days, she died on October 19, 1918.

The visitation was held in the Gillises' front room where family and friends gathered around as a priest conducted a brief ceremony. Mary (Lester's mother), noticing her youngest son was not present, searched the house and found him cowering in his bed. The nine-year-old pleaded to remain where he was, terrified at the idea of viewing Jenny in death. His mother pulled him from the bedroom and marched him downstairs. With her hands clasping his slender shoulders, she guided the trembling lad to the casket and said, "See now how peaceful your sister looks?"

Despite her assurances that Jenny was at rest, Mary noticed that from that day on, her boy displayed an unusual dread of anything associated with death. The mere sight of a cemetery from the car window would make him shudder.

After the funeral his parents decided to deal with Lester's dissatisfaction with St. Mark's by sending him to the St. Patrick's boarding school in Momence, Illinois, where their youngest daughter, sixteen-year-old Leona, was enrolled. They were confident his sister's presence, along with the school's remote location fifty miles south of Chicago, would discourage his truancy. A month passed with reports that he was doing well and seemed content.

Late on a rainy afternoon Lester, drenched, dirty, and clutching a tiny kitten appeared at his father's tannery. When Joseph demanded an explanation, the boy confessed that he could no longer stand the confinement at St. Patrick's. The previous day he had run off and slept overnight in a cornfield where he found the kitten and did his best to keep the animal warm and dry during a thunderstorm. In the morning the driver of a bakery wagon offered him and his new feline friend a ride, taking them as far as South Holland, Illinois. A salesman drove him into Chicago and generously provided the youngster with change for the street car.

At home Lester received a scolding from Mary, who announced he would be taken back to St. Patrick's the next morning. But her husband, usually the strict disciplinarian of the house, was apparently touched by his youngest son's pleadings not to be sent back. "The boy is homesick," he told Mary. "We shouldn't force him to go away if he wants to be here."

A heated discussion ensued between the couple, but Joseph prevailed. Lester was re-enrolled in St. Mark's with the understanding that he would abide by its rules.



Baby Face Nelson (Lester Gillis) and his mother Mary

On July 4, 1921, at the age of twelve, Nelson was arrested after accidentally shooting a fellow child in the jaw with a pistol he had found. He served over a year in the state reformatory. Arrested again for theft and joyriding at age 13, he was sent to a penal school for an additional 18 months.

By 1928, Nelson was working at a Standard Oil station in his neighborhood that was the headquarters of young tire thieves, known as "strippers". After falling in with them, Nelson became acquainted with many local criminals, including one who gave him a job driving bootleg alcohol throughout the Chicago suburbs. It was through this job that Nelson became associated with members of the suburban-based Touhy Gang (not the Capone mob, as usually reported). Within two years, Nelson and his gang had graduated to armed robbery. On January 6, 1930, they invaded the home of magazine executive Charles M. Richter. After trussing him up with adhesive tape and cutting the phone lines, they ransacked the house and made off with \$25,000 worth of jewelry. Two months later, they carried out a similar theft in the Sheridan Road bungalow of Lottie Brenner Von Buelow. This job netted \$50,000 in jewels, including the wedding ring of the bank's owner. Chicago newspapers nicknamed them "The Tape Bandits."

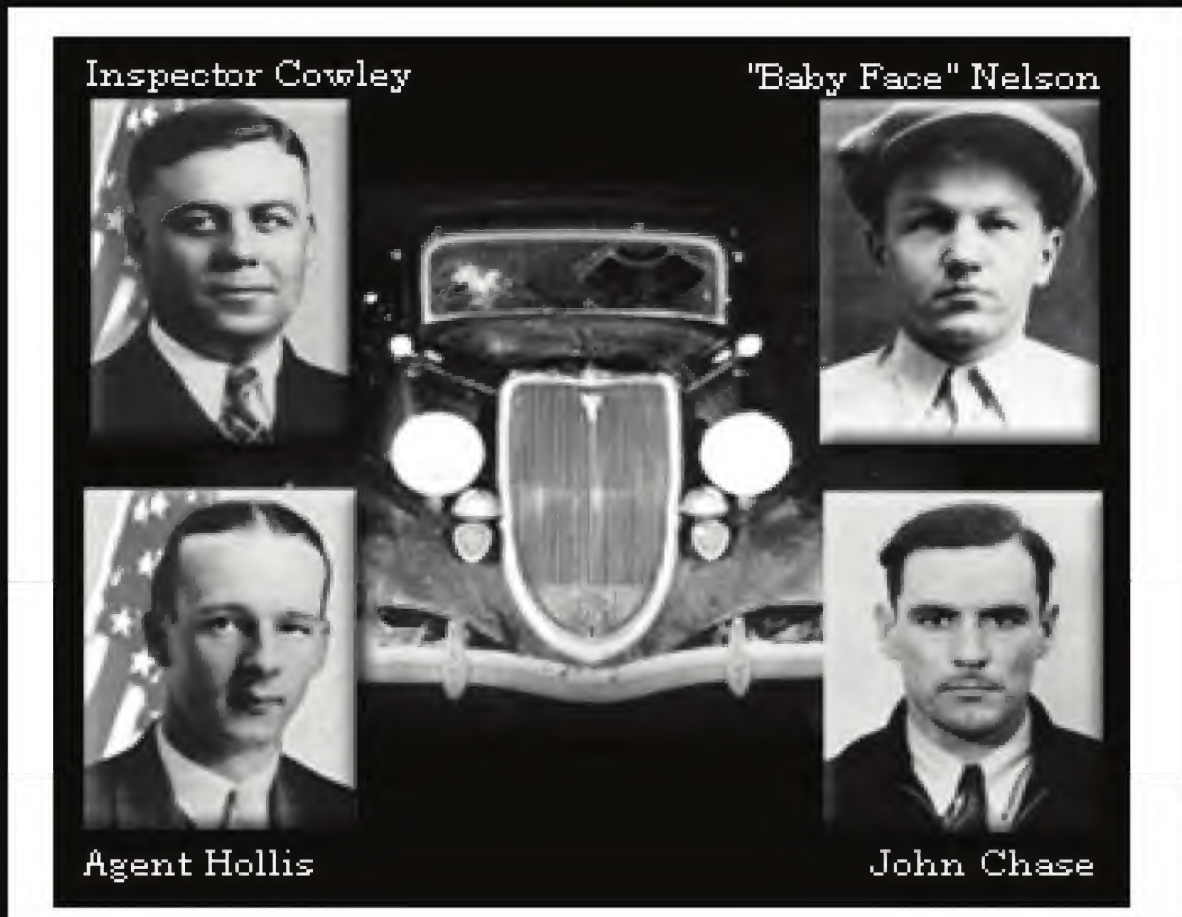
On April 21, 1930, Nelson robbed his first bank, making off with \$4,000. A month later, Nelson and his gang pulled their home invasion scheme again, netting \$25,000 worth of jewels. On October 3 of that year, Nelson hit the Itasca State Bank for \$4,600; a teller later identified Nelson as one of the robbers. Three nights later, Nelson stole the jewelry of the wife of Chicago mayor Big Bill Thompson, valued at \$18,000. She later described her attacker this way, "He had a baby face. He was good looking, hardly more than a boy, had dark hair and was wearing a gray topcoat and a brown felt hat, turned down brim." Years later, Nelson and his crew were linked to a botched roadhouse robbery in Summit, Illinois on November 23, 1930 that resulted in gunplay that left three people dead and three others wounded. Three nights later, the Tape Bandits hit a Waukegan Road tavern, and Nelson ended up committing his first murder of note, when he killed stockbroker Edwin R. Thompson.



A short but furious gun battle between FBI agents and Nelson took place on November 27, 1934 outside Chicago, in the town of Barrington resulting in the deaths of Nelson and FBI Special Agents Herman "Ed" Hollis and Samuel P. Cowley.

The Barrington gun battle erupted as Nelson, with Helen Gillis (Nelson's Wife) and John Paul Chase as passengers, drove a stolen V8 Ford south towards Chicago on State Highway 14. Nelson, always keen to spot G-Men, caught sight of a sedan driven in the opposite direction by FBI agents Thomas McDade and William Ryan. Nelson hated police and federal agents and used a list of license plates he had compiled to hunt them at every opportunity. The agents and the outlaw simultaneously recognized each other and after several U-turns by both vehicles, Nelson wound up in pursuit of the agent's car. Nelson and Chase fired at the agents and shattered their car's windshield. After swerving to avoid an oncoming milk truck, Ryan and McDade skidded into a field and anxiously awaited Nelson and Chase who had stopped pursuing. The agents did not know that a shot fired by Ryan had punctured the radiator of Nelson's Ford or that the Ford was being pursued by a Hudson automobile driven by two more agents: Herman Hollis (who was alleged to have delivered the fatal shot to a wounded Pretty Boy Floyd a month earlier) and Cowley. As a result, Ryan and McDade were oblivious to the events that happened next.

With his vehicle losing power and his pursuers attempting to pull alongside, Nelson swerved into the entrance of Barrington's North Side Park and stopped opposite three gas stations. Hollis and Cowley overshot them by over 100 feet (30 m), stopped at an angle, exited their vehicle's passenger door, under heavy gun fire from Nelson and Chase and took cover behind the car. The ensuing shootout was witnessed by more than 30 people.



Nelson's wife, fleeing into an open field under instructions from Nelson, turned briefly in time to see Nelson mortally wounded. He grasped his side and sat down on the running board as Chase continued to fire from behind their car. Nelson, advancing toward the agents, fired so rapidly with a .351 rifle that bystanders mistook it for a machine gun. Six bullets from Cowley's submachine gun eventually struck Nelson in the chest and stomach before Nelson mortally wounded Cowley with bullets to the chest and stomach, while pellets from Hollis's shotgun struck Nelson in the legs and knocked him down. As Nelson regained his feet, Hollis, possibly already wounded, moved to better cover behind a utility pole while drawing his pistol but was killed by a bullet to the head before he could return fire. Nelson stood over Hollis's body for a moment, then limped toward the agent's car. Nelson was too badly wounded to drive, so Chase got behind the wheel and the two men and Nelson's wife fled the scene. Nelson had been shot seventeen times; seven of Cowley's bullets had struck his torso and ten of Hollis's shotgun pellets had hit his legs. After telling his wife "I'm done for", Nelson gave directions as Chase drove them to a safe house on Walnut Street in Wilmette. Nelson died in bed with his wife at his side, at 7:35 p.m.

Hollis was severely wounded in the head and was declared dead soon after arriving at the hospital. At a different hospital, Cowley lived for long enough to confer briefly with Melvin Purvis and have surgery, before succumbing to a stomach wound similar to Nelson's. Following an anonymous telephone tip, Nelson's body was discovered wrapped in a blanket, in front of St. Peter Catholic Cemetery, in Skokie which still exists. Helen Gillis later stated that she had placed the blanket around Nelson's body because, "He always hated being cold..."

Newspapers then reported, based on the questionable wording of an order from J. Edgar Hoover ("...find the woman and give her no quarter"), that the FBI had issued a "death order" for Nelson's widow, who wandered the streets of Chicago as a fugitive for several days, described in print as America's first female "public enemy". After surrendering on Thanksgiving Day, Helen Gillis, who had been paroled after capture at Little Bohemia, served a year in prison for harboring her husband. Chase was apprehended later and served a term at Alcatraz

Baby Face Nelson is buried at Saint Joseph's Cemetery in River Grove, Illinois.



Helen Gillis





Leona Muriel Gillis

1905 - 1987

Leona was a sister of Baby Face Nelson

She attended St Pat's Academy
around 1918

(Information found in the book "Baby Face Nelson" Portrait of a Public Enemy)